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Adas Israel Men's Club Man Of The Year Award  
"A Helping Hand: Congress As A Force For Good"  
January 31, 2009

I am delighted and honored to accept this award.

The past year has been one of the busiest and boldest of my career in politics. I will take some time to talk about it tonight. But first I want to talk about Adas Israel and the community that I am proud to call my home away from home.

When I was first elected to Congress in 1974, Janet and I arrived with our young children in an unfamiliar city. We looked at different neighborhoods, schools, and shuls. What brought us to Adas was its reputation for outreach to young families. What we found was an instant community with a lot of families just like ours looking for friendship, spirituality, and a place for the kids to crawl around.

These days we look around and we still see a lot of families just like ours. Only now we are all chasing after our grandchildren.

While our roots remain in Los Angeles, Adas has become a fixture in our lives.

The children went to Hebrew school here. Janet was in the first adult bat mitzvah class. My son Michael had a bar mitzvah here. When my mother passed away I came here to say kaddish. And last year we gathered at Adas for the bris of our grandson Jacob.

I think the reason so many high profile Jewish officials in Washington DC have chosen to join Adas is not because it's a place to be seen, but because it is a place to blend in. It's a place to be part of a congregation committed to Judaism and invested in programs that highlight Jewish ethics and Jewish values.

From the *Havura* minyan to the main sanctuary we have been blessed with services and sermons that are inspiring and intellectually challenging.

As long time members, we've had the privilege of having teachers like Rabbi Rabinowitz, Rabbi Listfield, Rabbi Wohlberg and Rabbi Miller. And we have enjoyed getting to know Rabbi Steinlauf whose boundless energy, scholarship and creativity fit seamlessly in the engine of activity that runs at Adas on Shabbat and throughout the week.

Just this past week I had the honor of sponsoring Rabbi Steinlauf to give the opening prayer for the House of Representatives. Usually Members of Congress sponsor a clergyman from their own congressional district. I imagine it's a daunting task to choose one person among so many. But this was easy - I only have one Rabbi in Washington, DC!

As our luck would have it, the House Chaplain's office invited Rabbi Steinlauf to address the House on what ended up being the morning of the State of the Union. So I can faithfully say it was an inspirational day of words from start to finish.

It is hard to believe that it is barely a year ago that Barack Obama became the 44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States. His inauguration followed an election campaign that was infused with hope and renewal for the American spirit and for our political process.

There was a real sense of triumph that we had, indeed, elected an African American as President. There was a sense that America would be on the right track again. And that we needed new, vigorous leadership to confront the profound challenges we faced.

I felt, with Barack Obama's election, that this was the moment where I could finally help fulfill the reasons why I sought election to Congress in 1974 – that we had reached a moment where the causes I have pursued all my political life had the chance – a real chance – of being finally redeemed.

I knew that this was the moment to marry principle and politics and ensure that we used our political power responsibly to advance the agenda on which the 2008 election was decided.

That is why I sought to become Chairman of the Energy and Commerce Committee – the committee that would legislate the lion's share of the Obama agenda.

I believe it has been the most exciting and inspiring year for policy initiatives in over 40 years, and arguably the most productive first year for a new president since FDR.

Among our most important accomplishments was passage by the House of Representatives of the Affordable Health Care for America Act.

This landmark legislation would allow those with insurance to keep their plans and their doctors, while giving access to insurance to millions of families without insurance.

It would make it illegal for insurance companies to put a lifetime cap on coverage or deny coverage for pre-existing conditions.

And it would do so while controlling costs, expanding the Medicare prescription drug benefit, and reducing the deficit.

We also passed the Waxman-Markey American Clean Energy and Security Act, which would reduce our dependence on foreign oil and preserve our planet by reducing the pollution that causes global warming.

It would accomplish this by requiring electric utilities to meet 20% of electricity demand through renewable sources and energy efficiency by 2020, reduce carbon emissions through a free market cap and trade system, and invest nearly \$200 billion in clean energy technologies.

Indeed, in outlining the US position for the Copenhagen conference on global warming, President Obama adopted the Waxman-Markey targets, strengthening our leadership position on these issues.

Today, as we continue emerging from the Great Recession, people ask me: Why are you focusing on health care reform and climate change when the economy is so sick?

The answer is that we are doing health care, not only because of the equities involved, but because it constitutes 16% of our GDP, and increasing.

We are working on climate change, not only because of the catastrophic consequences of global warming, but because energy expenditures are inching past 9% of our GDP – levels not seen since the height of the Arab oil embargo.

When a quarter of your GDP is sick, you cannot have a healthy economy.

Although the election in Massachusetts may change some of the tactics, we cannot afford to relent on our goals.

We have the greatest medical technology in the world, the best health professionals, but we are saddled with a health system that is going to bankrupt us as a country. It is a system where millions of Americans live daily with the knowledge that they are just one serious illness away from financial catastrophe for themselves and their families.

Our dependence on Middle East oil, sourced from hostile and unstable regimes, has shackled our military and our foreign policy. There is nothing to stop a return to the cruel economic burden of \$4 per gallon gas. And if we don't start investing in the research, jobs and training for a green economy, China is more than eager to gain an edge over us.

We have to seize the opportunity to put our country back on the right track, to do some good, and to help improve our society and our world.

It was the great Rabbi Hillel who taught, "If I am not for myself, then who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, then what am I? And if not now, when?"

This principle applies to our engagement in the Middle East peace process and our efforts to restrain Iran's nuclear program. The status quo is a threat to the security of the United States and Israel, and we cannot and we will not sit idle.

It applies to our engagement in Haiti, where we stand with an outstretched arm to make sure that our neighbors can survive and rebuild from one of the greatest natural tragedies of our time.

Hillel's teaching is about our obligation to help ourselves and to empower ourselves to help others. I translate that into my own experience as a legislator with a belief that: *Government can, should and must be a force for good.*

Today, disdain for government is so strong – you don't need me to tell you about Rush Limbaugh, or Glenn Beck, or the Tea Parties and Sarah Palin.

This cynical outlook has been nurtured by a 40-year crusade led by ideological conservatives turn the American people against their elected officials by continually disparaging them and what they do.

As someone who has spent 35 years in Congress working for the general good, I absolutely reject this notion.

Congress is far from perfect and would benefit from some important reforms – such as restoring majority rule in the Senate, for example – but at a fundamental level it not only works, but it is a tremendous force for good.

During my time in Congress, I have participated in a number of difficult but important fights that have had enormous positive influence on people's lives:

Legislation limiting toxic air emissions, so that we can all breathe cleaner air ...

Expanding Medicaid coverage for the poor and the elderly ...

Banning smoking on airplanes ...and placing tobacco where it belongs, under the strict supervision of the Food and Drug Administration ...

Funding the first government-sponsored HIV/AIDS research ...

Lowering drug prices through generic alternatives and fostering the development of new drugs to treat rare diseases ...

Keeping for free of pesticides, and labeling it with nutritional information so that you know what you are eating ...

Establishing federal standards for nursing homes to protect the elderly from abuse and neglect ...

Exposing the use of steroids in baseball, and making drug use by professional athletes not only a shame, but a career-ending transgression...

We exposed the failures of the Katrina cleanup, the astonishing waste in Iraq associated with the use of private contractors such as Blackwater, and held Wall Street to account.

My greatest frustration is the degree of partisanship that exists in Washington. I tried on the health bill to seek bipartisan cooperation. But I was told repeatedly by the Republican leadership: "If you have a public option in there, we must oppose the bill."

Even after the public option came out, however, not one Republican came forward to say: "I can support your bill – if we can get these provisions added to it."

The same thing happened on the energy and climate bill. I reached out to the Republicans. But their leadership said to me – aside from stating that they did not believe human activity



caused global warming – that if we had a cap on carbon emissions and a trading system to reduce them in our bill, they could not support it under any circumstances.

It is this “take-no-prisoners” style of partisanship that I find extremely disappointing.

The only answer I know to it is to remain faithful to my beliefs and the agenda we are pursuing to write and enact the best legislation we can – along with the belief that we will, in fact, thereby help make America fundamentally better and our citizens more economically secure.

If we succeed in this, there will be a stronger consensus about the direction we have forged – and that, in turn, will help temper political passions in the years ahead.

It is hard work. Sometimes it is trying and tiring. But there are too many people who need government to give them a hand, an opportunity to reach their full potential, or in some cases a safety net.

And I can always look forward to Shabbat when I can step in to Adas, and regenerate my spirit and conviction for the challenges ahead.